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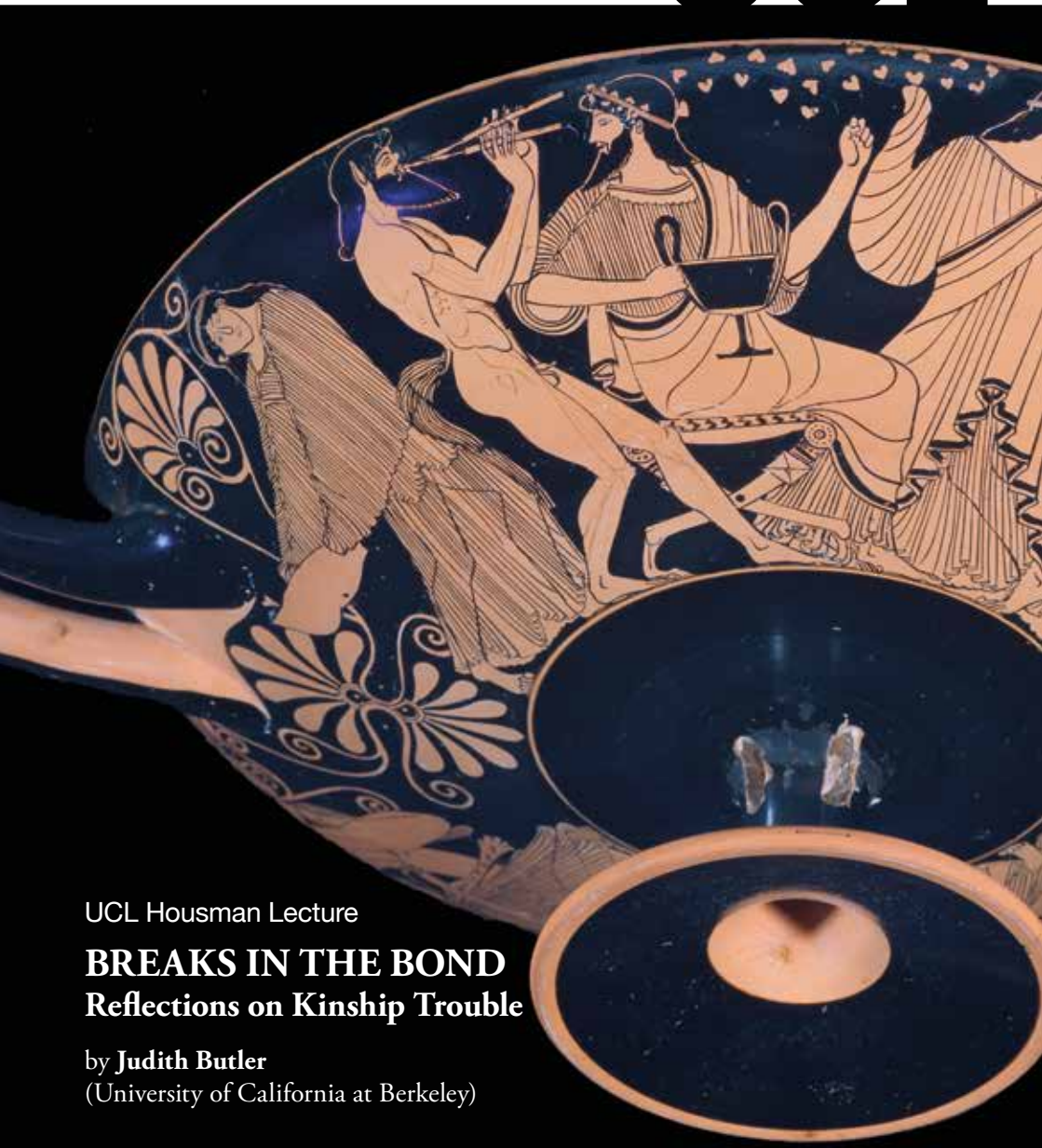

UCL Housman Lecture

BREAKS IN THE BOND
Reflections on Kinship Trouble

by **Judith Butler**
(University of California at Berkeley)

A.E. Housman (1859–1936)

Born in Worcestershire in 1859, Alfred Edward Housman was a gifted classical scholar and poet. After studying in Oxford, Housman worked for ten years as a clerk, while publishing and writing scholarly articles on Horace, Propertius, Ovid, Aeschylus, Euripides and Sophocles. He gradually acquired such a high reputation that in 1892 he returned to the academic world as Professor of Classics at University College London (1892–1911) and then as Kennedy Professor of Latin at Trinity College, Cambridge (1911–1936).

Housman Lectures at UCL

The Department of Greek and Latin at University College London organizes regular Housman Lectures, named after its illustrious former colleague (with support from UCL Alumni). Housman Lectures, delivered by a scholar of international distinction, originally took place every second year and now happen every year, alternating between Greek and Roman topics (Greek lectures being funded by the A.G. Leventis Foundation).

This is the ninth Housman Lecture, and it took place on 8 February 2017. Judith Butler is the Maxine Elliot Professor of Comparative Literature at the University of California at Berkeley.

Front & back cover images: Douris (painter), Greek (active c. 500–460 B.C.)
(detail) Red-Figure Cup Showing the Death of Pentheus (exterior) and a Maenad (interior), c. 480 B.C.
Terracotta, H. 5 in. (12.7 cm); Diam. 11 1/2 in. (29.2 cm), AP 2000.02
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BREAKS IN THE BOND
Reflections on Kinship Trouble

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In this essay I am interested in kinship, but not so much in its subversive forms. Rather, I want to query whether kinship "works" and, if so, how kinship works and, so, how it sometimes fails to work. One of my interests along the way is to begin to reconsider how tragedy allows us to think about the laws of kinship, or the norms that govern its practice. When I say that kinship "works", I mean that a set of relations prove to be binding and recognizable, organizing fundamental relations of dependency pertaining to life and death in time and space. That definition is too broad, but it establishes a framework that can be qualified in what follows.

What draws me to this question is an extraordinary and very ordinary fact, namely, that people are periodically confused about kinship, even those kin relations who are expected to be closest. And so, though we may want to define from the start kin relations as recognizable, it turns out that they are sometimes nearly unrecognizable. Children do ask, "Are you my mother?" and a fair amount of children's fiction is oriented around the question of whether or not a given animal, for instance, is or is not someone's mother.[1] Baby llamas wander about the streets asking all kinds of animals "are you my mama?" suggesting that visual perception does not furnish a sturdy enough criterion for that determination. Later in life, or even the other day on the subway, one hears remarks such as "what kind of mother are you?" spoken by a daughter, or even "what, I have a brother?" spoken with disdain, or "which one is the real mother?" said in a tone that is supposed to normalize heterosexuality; at such moments a certain incredulity or doubt is introduced into the practice of kin designation: the person referred to, or addressed, is oddly not commensurate with the kinship category that person is supposed to inhabit.

The question separates the person from the category, raising the more general question of how kinship categories do – and do not – quite attach to the persons they are supposed to name as well as the relationships they are supposed to designate and secure. We can ask questions such as "will you be my father?" or, in exasperation, "am I really your son?"; and in such instances, the questions are serious in as much as they elaborate a wish, or express confusion or alienation, and they tell us that something is not settled in the house of kinship. There are times when one cannot believe that someone is one's family member, and other times when we are enraged that they are. Yet at other times, we cannot recognize them as kin, even though they have been in that position for some time. Recognition falters in the midst of kinship. That may well be one of its defining moments.

First, let's ask a prior question: Why care about kinship? One clear reason is that rights of parenting are highly disputed, and in some states and some countries, sexual orientation and marital status are preconditions for adoption or even access to reproductive technology. And sometimes, as we know, people lose their children when their gender status changes, or when their sexual orientation becomes known – I could spend the rest of the day enumerating enraging examples of this kind. But that is not quite my purpose today.

When struggling for the legitimacy of certain forms of kinship, we tend not to focus on what forms of kinship might be subversive or even what kinds of disruptions we might find at the heart of kinship categories. And yet, it seems important that we do so, especially if we want to know what we are getting into. So, if we wanted to be able to name and pursue disruptive forms of kinship – and even if we wanted to break with kinship altogether as a model for intimate, generational, or interdependent associations, we would probably need first to know what kinship is, or whether it can be stably defined. If kinship is itself a way of ordering relationships, and we are looking to find something disruptive about it, could it be that this particular ordering of relations disrupts another order of relations? That seems to be the case when, for instance, Antigone, defying Creon and defending the honor and memory of at least one of her brothers, invokes the household gods to justify her act of loyalty to her brother by giving him a public burial in defiance of the edict of Creon, the sovereign.[2]

But even then, matters are somewhat confused, since Creon is, after all, her uncle, and she is therefore defying both filial and state duties when, in refusing to honor his decree that her brother, Polyneices, not be buried, she goes ahead and buries him anyway. In that moment, it seems that Antigone is defying her uncle, and so causing quite a problem within that household that is also a kingdom. And that is made all the more clear when she rather rudely dismisses her living sister, Ismene, insisting that she undertake her defiant act alone. She honors her brother by rejecting her sister and attacking her uncle – no great guardian-representative of the household gods is she. Kinship in this instance is already implicated in politics, if not its own site of war; belligerent politics is implicated in kinship (after all, Creon is mad because his nephew has defied him, a nephew-citizen, as it were, who thus redoubles his act of disloyalty by waging war against his sovereign-uncle). Although we might say that in Antigone's case, the household, the *oikos*, is identified with the militarized state, we have yet to see how war enters into kinship as one of its defining possibilities.

Family conflict is, of course, one way to talk about this war within kinship, but I want to suggest that when we speak about kinship, we are always talking about the possibility of a certain rupture: someone contests another's claim; someone else refuses to honor a command; in short, someone breaks with someone else for some reason, or refuses to speak to them anymore, holds back money, allocates it inexplicably to another relative, commits acts of unequal treatment and initiates temporary or permanent breaks. Even in those extreme instances when someone decides to disown another person, that form of disowning only makes sense in terms of what we call kinship; indeed, it defines a possibility or limit that centrally defines the field of its operations. Not everyone can disown anyone else; if a stranger seeks to disown me legally, I would find that strange, if not intriguing. I would assume that the person suffered a category mistake, or mistook me for one of his relatives – a kind of street transference that really does happen when stray people suddenly yell at you as if you are a relative. But for the most part, one has to be already related for that kind of break to happen. And when it does happen, it is a break in the relationship, – acts of extreme renunciation, even expulsion from the family, powerfully define those kinship relations that remain avowed: ghosts are always populating kin relations, and tragedy is one of the places where we see that most clearly.

If we define kinship as a particular way of organizing people generationally, whether or not we understand it as derived from reproductive relations or patrilineality or freely chosen intimate associations legally or non-legally established, we still imagine kinship as an organization that works, that really does organize and bring together people and order relationships through time and space. But if we do define it that way, as an enduring or binding set of relations, clearly mappable, have we perhaps infused a certain idealization into the definition that is defied by the practice itself? The presumption of such a description is that kinship lasts, and that it endures in a stable form. It is not a particularly contemporary or culturally restrictive claim to make if one acknowledges that the possibility of breakage, of disowning or being disowned, and even the periodic break-down of perceptual structures of recognition, may well inhere in the very practice of kinship. If that is true, the question is not so much which forms of kinship do we want, and which are disruptive of the dominant norms, but rather whether kinship is not, by definition, dependent on the possibility of disruption, understood as relationships that are invariably marked, or haunted, by the possibility of failing or fading.

Of course, we want to distinguish between more ordered and perhaps conservative forms of kinship and those that might be more innovative and disruptive. But can we imagine order on one side and disruption as its alternative?[3] Matters become more complicated when we realize that "kinship" in English is not quite translatable into French or into many other languages. In the French, one encounters a distinction between *parenté* and *filiation*. The first delineates the legal relation between child and parent, usually regarded as father or mother, as a result of lineage or legal ties that emerge from familial transmission – including property. *Filiation* can include what are generally understood to be "blood ties" and so intersects with *parenté*, but can also include familial relations that are not based on conjugality or directly situated within a trackable lineage.[4] *Filiation* can, and does, exceed *parenté*. And yet, do both not constitute domains of "kinship" in English? Indeed, depending on which aspect of kinship one wants to identify (or support), one chooses to translate kinship with one word or another. Lévi-Strauss referred to "parenté", but he also underscored and elaborated the anthropological distinction between relations based on descent and those based on status. For Lévi-Strauss, the family was but one form of organizing kinship, but the two terms were certainly not equivalent. Lévi-Strauss did not quite explain, however, how kinship comes into being outside the framework of conjugality or lineage, although contemporary scholars have been left to reflect on which status can be achieved through practice, and whether kinship, as Elizabeth Freeman suggests, can be a kind of doing.[5]

Oddly enough, the term "kinship" became quite important within feminist anthropology in the US and the UK in the 1970s precisely because it facilitated a set of questions about forms of relationship that were binding and constitutive, and that could not be reduced to particular forms of the family.[6] At that time, it was important to know that neither the nuclear heterosexual family nor male domination was natural or historically necessary. The term kinship, very important to ethnographic study in anthropology, was larger than the term family, since the sphere of relations that regulated dependency, matters of birth and death, or inheritance and obligation, could not always be adequately described by the contemporary norms of family. If kinship relations exceed family relations, then the family is but one historical instance of kinship, which means that with the assistance of the term "kinship" we can start to ask, through what kinds of relationships are the most basic of human bonds forged and formed, what are their variabilities and possibilities, their temporal and spatial organization? How do we think about queer kinship or modes of intimate alliance that take neither conjugality nor reproduction as their defining moments or organizing principles, and where dependency is not primarily figured by the child? Of course, this leads to an even more complicated terrain, since not all human bonds can be kin relations, and not all kin relations are human, so how do we distinguish, if we do, between family, kin, friendship, cross-species co-habitation and community, and even broader modes of belonging that provide some kind of provisional and iterable structure to intimate and social relations? But note how quickly we seem to arrive at disorientation by virtue of the instability of the categories themselves. If kinship

is exclusively defined neither by reproductive nor by marital relations, how do we then delimit the field of kinship relations? Or are we of necessity launched into a domain that cannot be delimited? We have, it seems, two different kinds of questions at issue. The first is what kinds of relations we call kinship rather than, say, friendship or community. The second is whether those we call kin are stably and enduringly marked in that way. In other words, can the field of kinship be delimited and stabilized? And are our kinship categories subjected to a disruption, meaning that the possibility of their coming to an end, or even suddenly starting, constitutes them from the start?

I am aware that for some time anthropologists no longer engage in the study of kinship as if it could be comprehensively charted and mapped. Over and against those who might claim that there are real kinship relations and then fictive ones, a strong argument has been made that the delineation of kin relations involves us in the making of fictions, the elaboration of imaginary scenarios in which the fixed and unequivocal character of kin relations is presumed, usually with marriage and reproduction at its center.[7] The very stipulation of what kinship is thus carries a certain commitment to what it should be, which means that it is less the starting point for a set of descriptions than the articulation of a set of idealizations or even fantasies.[8] My wager is that we cannot really begin with stipulative definitions of kin relations, not only because what counts as kin is subject to historical change, but because we may only know kinship relations through the breach. Or that would be one lesson we might take from the nexus of Greek tragedy and an analysis of contemporary cultural forms that draws upon psychoanalysis.

From that perspective, it might prove more useful to ask, at what particular moments does someone become kin, or is someone recognized to be kin, and at what point, and for what reason, do they become unknown or unknowable as kin? Why is it that kin relations make themselves known precisely when they are less easily recognized, or in the aftermath of not having been recognized at all? Kinship might arise at a moment in which one feels acute forms of ambivalence, such as "I cannot live without this person, and I must absolutely live without this person" or "this person loves me madly, and so I will surely be killed by this person, if I am killed by anyone at all." At such a moment, we might not explicitly say to ourselves "oh, I am in the throes of kinship" or ask "is this kinship that has me in its grip"? But one does usually understand that if, for instance, echoing throughout one's daily life is the sense that one's father said one was perfect and one's mother wanted one dead, or the same parent who said one was perfect also wanted one dead, these are active traces of kinships that have become part of psychic life. The point is not just that primarily others once said or did such things, but that the saying and the doing can continue without them, even when, especially when, they are gone. Such utterances, or propositional forms give shape to perception and operate in spectral and audible ways even when the speaker no longer exists and the utterance can no longer be heard. Surely, we can think about the intergenerational transmission of trauma along these lines. Or again, if one's grandmother said, and in some ways still says "why don't you eat my food? You don't like it?" and then right when you start eating, says, "you know, you don't have to eat so much – why do you feel you have to finish the plate?" *kinship might then reside in those sudden swings that belong to the idiosyncratic absolutes of affective life*. Desiring intense adulation and fearing death, for instance, but also, never being quite sure whether one is eating because one is simply hungry, or not hungry and so not eating, or eating without hunger, or not eating even though one is hungry. Similar echoes tend to reverberate through ordinary modes of living together with other people: I belong here in this house with these others / I will die if I stay here in this house with these others – this is one form the knot of kinship takes, one echo by which it makes its enduring, if fugitive, presence known.

In this sense, kinship is not precisely an order that quells a disturbance or a disruption, but, rather, a disruption that takes place, a breach that is prior to any question of rule or law. Indeed, order, rule, and law always arrive belatedly to make sense of the breach, but as we know, they rarely stop the breach from happening again; indeed, the rules and laws of kinship, including the incest taboo, seem to presume the potential breach, which means perhaps that the breach precedes the rule, and even proves essential to its establishment. Indeed, the repetition of the breach is precisely the sign and substance of kinship itself.

So, I am saying neither that all kinship relations endure nor that they all come to an end, only that when and where they do exist, they seem to be partially defined by those constitutive possibilities of temporal duration and rupture. My stronger suggestion is that kinship charts and genealogical studies and any of the formal analyses of kinship that we find in classical modes of anthropology or archival history all seek to codify a set of relations that are from the start subject to misrecognition and even murderous confusion.[9] So if we think about Oedipus, the truth of the matter is that he could not properly recognize his mother or his father, or at least, he could not recognize them consciously, which opens up the question of how unconscious forms of intimating kinship take place. He murders that guy coming toward him on the road, but that guy only becomes, for him, his father, once he is told by someone reliable that Polybus, the man who raised him, is not his father. Of course his circumstances are not so usual, since his parents sent him off with a shepherd to be abandoned on a hillside, exposed to the elements, and left to die. Odd that Freud does not identify infanticide, rather than incest, as the primary wish conveyed by Sophocles' play, *Oedipus Rex*.[10] Whatever desires such a child might form under those conditions are probably marked both by the fact that his parents wanted him dead and by the fact that others decided to cover up that hideous truth. Oedipus journeys along away from Polybus and Merope, depending on a story he has been told by a drunken stranger that he was born with a curse upon him, and that he was fated to destroy both of his parents. He thinks he is travelling away from those parents and that fate. He situates his kinship relations in the terms given to him by that narrative, so he relies on an initial set of stories about who his parents are, and then another report about a curse, which prompts him to take action. I don't know why he was in foul mood as he walked down that road and the huge caravan came toward him, but maybe he was out of sorts that he had to leave his home because of a cursed curse.

Kinship first gets established by someone else giving an authoritative narrative of the relationship, one that involves a form of instruction: "say mama" or "papa," and the child starts sounding out what he or she has heard, and then some preliminary form of recognition takes place that starts to install kin relations in linguistic ones; getting the sound right and directing it to the appropriate object is among the first forms that kinship recognition takes. There is no way for an infant in the midst of learning how to enunciate to evaluate the claim that this is your mother or your father; that emergent being finds its way into the incipient moments of speech, relying on mimetic directives, which are composed of sounding out forms of address and naming stray objects, usually "cat" and "ball." But I go astray, since, as we know, Oedipus does not know his kin precisely because he would then know that (a) he was supposed to commit parricide and incest and (b) they thought to have him die first, to let someone else take him away and prepare his death out of sight. If he knew his parents, he would know about murder, the murder that was feared and the murder that was nearly committed. He would know about the curse on him. In other words, if he were to know kinship relations, he would have to understand them as potentially murderous.

Although usual readings of *Oedipus Rex* assume that there is a difference between his real parents and those who simply acted the part, it would seem the couple that gave birth to him and the couple who raised him were both part of what we might call parenting. It is not untrue to claim that Oedipus had two fathers and two mothers, though much of the tragic drama of the play depends on our accepting the ontological difference between those who reproduce the child and those who rear the child: in practice, both activities can be part of parenting, but not necessarily. If he had slain Polybus, it would have been a different play. We might have thought at first that it was parricide only to learn later that it was simple murder. And if he had slept with Merope, we would have thought that was incest only later to conclude that even if it wasn't, it was just plain disturbing. But like Oedipus, we depend on how the story is told in order to gain our coordinates within the web of kinship, and though in Freud's early readings of *Oedipus Rex*, he identifies incest as the early wish of the male child, it seems that prior to any possibility of incest is an infanticidal wish on the part of the parents. Oedipus is presumed to want to sleep with his mother, but his mother has allied with his father to let him die on a hillside; the incestuous desire of the child is preempted by the murderous desire of the parents.

If Oedipus had hesitated on the road before he slew Laius, if he had stopped to wonder whether the man with the caravan coming toward him, taking up all the space, pushing him aside (already a kind of murderous force, an ancient form of road rage), could be his father, he would have had to (a) start to doubt the story he had been told and (b) conceive of the father as one who was willing to run him down. Indeed, that murderous underpinning of the story of kinship was essential to the story. But given that Oedipus left Corinth precisely because he did not want to do harm to those he considered to be his parents, he might still worry about doing harm to anyone, since it would seem that the one to whom he wants to do the most harm would presumably be the father. In other words, given the curse, if Oedipus wants to kill someone, he might wonder whether, on the basis of that fact alone, that person could be his father. If the curse defines kinship in such a way that the father is the one he wants to murder and the mother is the one with whom he wishes to have sexual relations, it would seem to follow that those kin relations are established through those desires. So, in a way, Oedipus produces his father by killing him, and establishes his mother by sleeping with her. They are apparently the singular objects of those desires. The recognition comes later, of course. In the moment of passion, those kin relations cannot quite be seen, and this constitutes the frailty of the incest taboo as well as the taboo against parricide. Simply put, one cannot see what one is doing in the heat of those passions.

So, if we ask, at least for Oedipus, whether the father becomes the father at the moment of the murder, and if the mother in some sense ascends to her maternal place at the moment in which a belated recognition is made that she is the one with whom he had sexual relations. Or if kinship really gets conferred later and from elsewhere, a stray story that someone tells about a time when one did not exist, then the retrospective acknowledgment comes with infinite guilt and self-punishment – two acts he performed turned out to be breaches of the relationship, and it is only as a consequence of the breach he belatedly recognized that he then arrives at the recognition that that man and that woman, his wife, are his father and his mother. Kinship arrives through startled questions: "What, that was my father I slew?" "What, that was my mother with whom I slept?" Many characters in Greek tragedy have to be persuaded that someone was their kin only after a certain set of actions have taken place, and that persuasion usually happens through authoritative narratives that some authority, usually blind, like Tiresias, feels compelled to offer. Still, in both *Oedipus Rex* and Euripides' *The Bacchae*, characters suffer from protracted incredulity about who those people or animals may be to whom they are said to be related. The divine enters the picture as well – has it become human or animal? Is it the spirit of metamorphosis itself?

In Euripides' play, *The Bacchae*, the frenzied hunt and dismemberment of Pentheus is accomplished most dramatically by his mother, Agaue, in a kind of blind frenzy.[11] At the same time, that destructive spree is pursued collectively by the Bacchic women in response to Dionysus' command to hunt and kill Pentheus. As in *Antigone*, a war is conducted within the play to see whose command will finally hold sway. Pentheus, the ruler, cannot rule the women who, under the influence of Dionysus – particularly, his song and his command – have suddenly left their habitual weaving, gone off into the woods, and given their bodies over to men who are described by one British translator as "lecherous."[12] Pentheus looks upon the scene and decides this unbridled sexual lust is a threat to his own sovereignty: in rage, he asks "must I be slave to my own slave-women?" Pentheus has lost control of the women (or, rather, in losing control of his women, he loses sovereign authority), and the women have entered into libidinal frenzy, occupying themselves first with wine, song, dance, and unrestrained sexual relations. But then, when Dionysus arrives in those woods, androgynous and charismatic, commanding them to hunt and destroy Pentheus, they follow, like the followers of Charles Manson. His song seduces and excites them, but his command controls them. And it is at this point that their desire is redirected to satisfy his command. So, though there are readings of this play that tend to celebrate the sexual liberation of women from domesticity, let us note that the women are not precisely liberated, but rather submit deliriously to another command. Just for the record, Cadmus is the father of Agaue and Semele. Semele gives birth to Dionysus, or so it seems, and dies after releasing Dionysus to Zeus in the midst of her pregnancy. Agaue gives birth to Pentheus.

So the agon of the play is between two cousins, Pentheus and Dionysus, both of whom are vying for control over the women.

Throughout the play, kinship takes form as an accusation, a fantasy, or a guilt-ridden recognition. The play opens with Dionysus, who has assumed the form of a man, who explains why he has chosen Thebes as the place to "raise [his] Bacchic shout" and start recruiting women to leave their homes for the woods. Semele, his mother, after being urged to lie by her father, Cadmus, falsely claims in public that Zeus was, in fact, the father of her child. That is an odd thing for a father to do, but perhaps the position of the father within this play is to compel his daughter to lie precisely about who is the father of the child – the kinship position is articulated through the lie. The sisters of Semele had previously claimed that she bore the child by some mortal, and when she then died, this same group of truth-driven sisters claimed that Zeus took Semele's life because of the false accusation made against him (so sisters are those, who defend each other against false accusations but themselves have the hubris falsely to accuse the gods). Dionysus, clearly acting as Zeus' emissary, punishes them all with a form of delirium that drives them from their homes, a form of radical and sudden de-domestication. To be driven from the home is to find oneself outside the contained spatial organization of kinship itself. What interests me is the very next moment. Dionysus boasts about intoxicating the women as punishment for their offense: "therefore, I have driven those same sisters mad, turned them all frantic out of doors; their home now is the mountain; their wits are gone. I have made them bear the emblem of my mysteries; the whole female population of Thebes, to the last woman, I have sent raving from their homes."

In what sense, if any, has Dionysus offered us a justification for his action? Why precisely were the sisters driven mad, and why is it from the home that they are driven? Dionysus understands himself as having induced them to such action, exercising a fully maddening effect on all the women – and so, in this sense, Dionysus advertises his power and aggrandizes himself. How cool to drive each and every woman so utterly mad! At the same time, he is himself the effect of a set of circumstances he never chose, and in relation to which he remains powerless. He was not the one who boasted about Zeus as the father, and yet his mother is struck down for doing so, and he now explains his "choice" as a consequence of that unwilled sequence of deeds that preceded his life. "Therefore," I have driven those sisters mad. What conjunction of forces do we find in that "therefore"? On the one hand, the sisters of Semele, who expose the story about Zeus as a lie, are the ones who publicize the crime, and so in some sense, their public declaration of the crime solicits Zeus to level a punishment against the liar. On the other hand, they do regard Dionysus as a god, so saying Zeus is his father is really out of the question. Is it possible that Dionysus is the son of Zeus without Zeus being the father? Indeed, it is.

When the chorus starts their own delirious narration, they tell us that Zeus, enraged by the false accusation against him, throws a fire bolt or lightning flash that somehow extracts the child from the mother it kills. So Semele dies in the same flash that ejects the child into Zeus' hands. Eager to hide the gestating foetus from Hera (jealous, always), he sews the pre-infant into his own thigh "with golden pins", where gestation presumably continues, until Zeus himself gives birth, in his own way, via the thigh, to baby Dionysus. It would seem that Dionysus assumes divine qualities when he is separated from his human mother, beamed up to Zeus, and certainly when he is sprung into the world by the unpinning of the thigh. So Zeus is not the father, unless, of course, we want to make a provision for pregnant fathers, a contemporary possibility, to be sure. But even then, Zeus is not the biological father. Paradoxically, enraged by the false accusation, he takes over the gestational process, usurping the maternal place and killing her off. Why does the man, here a man-god, become a mother when he is falsely accused of being the father? Since the gestational process is, as it were, sequentially divided between Semele and Zeus, it would seem that Dionysus has two mothers. Confusing, perhaps, but hardly out of the question. These two mothers don't live together, and they don't raise a son in common. The one lies about the other, and the other kills the first. Extracting Dionysus from the womb, Zeus establishes his thigh as a proper substitute location. The story seems to resolve into the following proposition: "I, Zeus, was never the

father, but I am now the mother. I give birth to my son Dionysos, himself a feminine form, a boy/girl who will continue to punish those who accuse me of fathering him." A bit of gender trouble in the midst of kinship trouble, to be sure.

This is one of many interesting transformations in the play, and in some ways the motif is repeated when Dionysus persuades Pentheus to dress up as a woman, to hold the thyrsus, and to move and dance with the Bacchic women as one of them. Having fallen prey to the charms of Dionysus, Pentheus happily dresses up as a woman, and then starts to see double. Which is the Thebes he knows? The chorus, on whom we depend for some narrative orientation, itself becomes delirious, claiming now to be in thrall to Dionysus as well. And when Agaue then leads the pack to dismember her son, Pentheus, she does not recognize him. Does she fail to recognize him because he is, for the moment, a girl or because he has not only departed from his first gender, but has become an animal? She, of course, is convinced that she has hunted down a young mountain-lion, and she is, in her frenzy, acting the part of a huntress. So let us hold this in mind: Pentheus assumes first the appearance of a man and then a woman, and then a wild animal, at which point he is killed. So when she holds the head of her son after being asked to look a bit more closely, she asks "who" has done this monstrous deed? She does not recognize that she is the one who did the deed until Cadmus, her father, tells her the story, which is authoritatively narrated to her ex post facto. In an effort to restore order, Cadmus re-asserts paternal authority, insisting that she recognize that she has killed her own son (fathers now become those who hold their daughters accountable for killing their own sons). Her initial refusal is followed by reluctant and appalled acceptance, and with that recognition comes grief. Another defining sign of kinship, to be sure. But so, too, surely is the blindness. Kin positions are susceptible to misrecognition. "No, I am not his father, but his mother" (that might be Zeus' utterance); "That is not my son, it is a mountain-lion" (Agaue's propositional form); "That cannot be my mother" (Dionysus, looking at Zeus); "How did he come to be my father, that stranger?" (Oedipus' question, retrospectively). Zeus is a mother; his son is a lion.

Dionysus is himself, and not himself. Even Tiresias, who makes an appearance as a dancing old man, is not quite himself for a while, yet is himself. After Agaue boasts that she has left the life of weaving for hunting and for greater things, Cadmus finally re-asserts paternal authority, insisting that she recognize that she has killed her own son. What follows is an infinite sorrow and remorse. The women return home to their former masters, abandoning their new ones (this is not a story about women's liberation, in this sense), and sexual pleasure is now linked not only with murderous destruction, but with infinite shame and sorrow (this is not a story about sexual liberation).

Let us return to that strange sequence in which Pentheus is induced to dress and dance as one of the Bacchic women, and is then perceived as an animal, and killed by his mother, herself in Bacchic frenzy as well. We move from one gender to the other and then to animality. We are at the same time also following a sequence in which lustful dancing leads to murder. When both Pentheus and Dionysus assume feminine form, it starts a series of misrecognitions that culminate with the confusion between animal and human forms. And all this seems precipitated by a divine creature who, in becoming human, occupies an oscillating set of gender positions. Shall we conclude that the transposition of gender, one that already took place when Zeus violently usurped the gestational process, continues as Dionysus beguiles with his feminine form, and Pentheus becomes a dancing woman? In the course of those transitions, Agaue sees that young mountain lion and moves in for the kill. What makes those transitions possible? Is it that there are already affinities, if not forms of kinship, between the one gender and the other, and between human and animal, such that they can become confused with one another? It is not that Pentheus is really a man, and not a woman, or really a woman at the moment his mother sees him, and not an animal, although that is one way to describe the sequence and even one way to try to make it right. The change from one gender to the other and then the move into animality articulate relations that work transversally across established kinship ties, based on claims of paternity and maternity. Those ties represent forms of affinity that work through metonymy and concentricity, not following the rules of kinship

based only on reproductive lines. In crossing both the gender divide and the divine/human/animal divides, Pentheus articulates modes of crossing over that challenge those divisions and pose the question of whether there might be more overlap than such binary distinctions usually allow. But this is also a threatening situation: for how to orient oneself in a world in which such typologies not longer hold? That he represents that breakdown may well be one reason why Pentheus is killed.

What gets laid out in a dramatic story in Greek tragedy is a kind of confusion or double vision that seems to characterize psychic life more generally, so that one cannot always tell the difference between one's lover and one's mother, or one's father and a stranger, what one loves and seeks to preserve, and what one desires to destroy. And one vacillates there in confusions, trying to separate the one from the other, but not always very successful. As you can see, it is as if the one term is nearly disowned by the other, or the one term is engulfed by the other, or the confusion stays precisely where it is, vacillating, and one waits or struggles for clarity. These are not exactly narrative structures, but constitutive binds. In fact, nowhere are the positions and rules taken for granted here. They neither effectively order passions nor do their punishments always hold firm. In this way, kinship relations are articulated not only in the breach wrought by passion, but also in the guilt and sorrow that follows; they are sites of murderous pleasure and infinite remorse. So, though we might say that none of these stories would have the force they have were it not that kinship relations are already in place regardless of whether they are appropriately recognized, it seems equally true that something about kinship has to be enacted through dramatic or narrative means for kinship to expose its faultlines and persistence. Perhaps kinship cannot really be mapped as a stable set of positions because some part of its temporal life is enacted through displacement, inversion, and modes of passionate unknowingness. In other words, kinship is at least in part a mode of living out a set of passions that constantly disrupt one another: I love you, I murder you, I cannot live without you. You murder me, or perhaps most fundamentally: stay! Leave!

Our standard way of reading the story is to say that the reason we need to have rules of kinship clearly known is that they will keep us from committing acts of murder and incest, but of course, if we think about instances of domestic violence, the propensity for murders to be committed by an intimate, and even the commission of incest within existing family forms, then neither murder nor incest are really solved through recourse to kinship. Indeed, they seem to be an integral part of its story. Further, if we seek to establish a difference between human communities and the life of animals by claiming that humans are structured by kinship, then we invest kinship with a humanizing force, one that is exercised at the same time that gender is unequivocally established, and heterosexual reproduction made the defining structure of kinship ties. And yet, running through this story is the idea that certain equivocations tend to recur, and that they cannot be legislated away by rules of any kind. I mentioned those that we found in Oedipus: "mother/lover" and "father/stranger." For Antigone, there seems to be "brother/lover" and "uncle/sovereign." These are all forms of seeing double, as it were, and that surely is what is happening when Dionysus and Pentheus are at once man and woman, and when Agaue's son becomes man/woman/animal. We can read the story to get to the end and then try to figure out its moral. Or we can see what interrupts the story as it proceeds, equivocations and echoes that are perhaps the psychic reverberations of kinship, found especially in psychic structures of ambivalence. These recurring forms of doubleness interrupt the sequence of the story, suggesting that the ties of kinship that cross and link the human and the animal are not opposites, not mutually exclusive possibilities, but cousins, even kissing cousins, as Frances Bartkowski has argued in her book by that name.[13] Is the human not always a human animal, and how would we extract the animality from the human? And who is more animal in the killing scene, Agaue, the huntress, or Pentheus, cross-dressed, killed as a lion?

At the end of *The Bacchae*, it seems we are in the world of the fully awake, having undergone a quick and painful detoxification and moral awakening. Is Cadmus the spectator who is now on stage? Does he himself undergo

nothing? In some ways, he does not recognize his own destructiveness; he makes Agaue recognize it, but then he takes on the punishment, inheriting it from his daughter. Nietzsche was but one critic of Euripides who found himself angered by endings such as these since they finally refuse intoxication and even sexuality in the name of shame, moral ascesis, the paternal law, and self-punishment.[14] The outbreak of violent destruction among kin surely gives good ground for firming up the laws of kinship, especially the taboos against murder and incest. But does that happen because kin relations were lost or suspended? Or does that happen because violence and destruction within kinship is one of its constitutive modalities? Does the situation of final recognition take the form of a call to law and order? In some ways, yes, but it also makes us see double, as it were, and suggests something about the doubleness that characterizes kinship relations, with or without our knowing. Who did the deed? It was not me, but it was me – how could that be the case? I could not have done this, or I did not do this, but I did, and so I do not know anymore who I am. To what lands of unknowing and disorientation have I been banished? These are the questions that belong to Aguae, but also to Cadmus. Does the punishment restore a human order, or do we see that the order we call human depends upon those traversals of categories of gender, humanness, and animality that are recurrent and constitutive?

Agaue is surely not alone in thinking her son was a mountain lion. Oliver Sacks tells the story with some humor and seriousness about the man who mistook his wife for a hat.[15] His point is to elaborate on the neurological conditions for misrecognition. But are there other conditions for misrecognition as well? And can they be found in the emotional dispositions of kin relations, ones that are, after all, usually characterized by forms of dependency that are sometimes unmanageable, enraging, intoxicating and sometimes blinding, difficult to see or grasp, and which make the right course of action difficult to see or apprehend? And though Greek tragedy often relies on certain forms of blindness that seek to demonstrate why we need to have clear sight, it is equally true that sometimes not being able to see the surface of reality gives one greater powers of apprehension, which is the case with Tiresias, the blind prophet, whose visions are more lucid than anyone else's.

The problem is not exactly that Agaue did not see what was in front of her, but that she could not recognize that the young animal could also be her son. What drove her in ways that she herself could not recognize? And in what way did she wish not to see those very forces by which she was driven? Dionysus is sometimes the name we give to this problem, one that surely also surfaces in Freud's theory of the drives. We might say, in psychoanalytic terms, that such scenes in Greek tragedy bring to the fore the problem of the relation between the demands of recognition and the life of the drive, but if we want to go in that direction, we would need to understand more about how desire, rage, and grief both define and threaten kinship. What threatens kinship, in other words, is that the passions on which it depends, and which it generates, are precisely those that break its bonds.

If we conclude that Greek tragedies such as *The Bacchae* deliver a clear call for laws that must govern kin relations more firmly, we have arrived at an important ethical insight, to be sure. It is crucial that murder and incest be proscribed for any number of reasons, and it is also crucial that especially within kin relations, that is, those that involve caring for those who are in dependent positions, that exploitation be opposed. But should we not care equally about the murder or exploitation of those who are not kin? Why does kinship establish the limits of non-violent and non-exploitative action? Further, which version of kinship are we asked to accept? When we argue that a child ought not to be disregarded or misrecognized or become the recipient of brutal or violent behavior, we are claiming that a child requires a caring environment, the loving attention of those who care for him or her, and even that those who are caretakers undergo whatever ethical formation and struggle is required to provide that sustaining environment and that aggressive impulses not turn into violent actions. My view is that we don't need restrictive accounts of kinship based on positions of mutual exclusion in order to provide for a caring environment and a proscription on intimate violence. We know that relations can and do break apart for any number of reasons, and sometimes they endure; they break and resume several times, or they suddenly or slowly start, take hold, and are formed anew. Sometimes they even endure in a loving way.

Can these stories return us to the problem of those breaks in kinship that seem to be part of its very definition, and those forms of misrecognition that seem to characterize the life of kin relations? In a film called *A Kid with a Bike* (*Le gamin au vélo*, 2011) by the Dardenne brothers, a boy finds himself in a situation where his mother is dead and his father has abandoned him, and he is left with no discernible kin relations. He is put in an institution for boys from which he regularly runs away. In one such scene, he is trying to find his old bicycle, a treasured gift from his father, and slowly comes to understand that his father has sold it. This is simply not possible. He tells everyone "my father would not have sold the bike." He is also saying "my father would not have abandoned me." And in the middle of a most difficult struggle against the recognition that his father has deliberately left him, and that the bike was sold for money his father needed, the boy becomes angry and runs away from the caretakers who seek to return him to the institution. The idea of his father is coming apart. Who is his father? Is that man still his father? Father/Stranger! Has he been disowned? He runs inside an office at the apartment building where he used to live, and a woman he does not know is sitting in the waiting room, and by accident, he is thrust upon her, or thrusts himself – it is unclear; let's say a certain drive is at work. He finds himself with his arms around her, clutching madly to this unknown person. The adults apologize on his behalf, and she says it is fine if he wants to hold on to her, but just not so hard. They do not even know each other's names, and yet he embraces her, a stranger accidentally there, and she accepts his embrace. They do, over time, become kin, and maybe at that moment of the unchosen embrace, they became kin. The story is oddly Christian, for sure, but what becomes clear is that she becomes his kin without precisely becoming his mother. She doesn't sew him into her thigh, but she does take over the caretaking process. Motherhood is not the language they need or use, though what she becomes is surely allied with that term. Those tied to one another through biology don't come through for one another, but those who are strangers to one another lend their bodies at urgent moments, initiating a new kin relation – not only a new person admitted into existing kinship, but a new form for kinship itself, or so it seems. Who are they to one another? We could answer the question affirmatively, and say that they have become kin. But if we do that too quickly, we risk forgetting that one recurring feature of becoming kin is precisely to ask the question, who are you? Who are you to me? And who am I to you? Perhaps kinship happens precisely when we are least sure, trying to focus, vacillating, suspended in a state of protracted incredulity.

It is probably also marked by the ethical dilemma posed by destructive passions that have the power to transform what we see, and lead us to assert with certainty that we have not destroyed when we clearly have. Perhaps kinship is the place where at least one very fundamental kind of destructiveness and remorse follow upon each other in quick succession. Perhaps as well it raises other sorts of questions: why are we more horrified by doing violence to those who are our kin than those who are not, and should it finally matter whether Agaue killed a human or an animal? Does the play perhaps open up a wider set of questions about what or who is justifiably killed, and who is not? The grief and remorse make sense because the mother mistakenly killed her son, but what about all those other casualties that are unrelated to us, the innumerable civilians destroyed in current wars? Should we be concerned only to safeguard the lives or our kin, or do we need, rather badly, to expand that category until it achieves a global dimension? After all, if we claim that some human who was killed was not really a human, but only a human shield, or if we claim that some animal does not deserve the same solicitude as a human life, we are deciding a rather arbitrary limit to our prohibition on killing.

If kinship delimits who we may kill (and who we most want to kill), then it would seem that if the prohibition on killing is to be as general as possible, so too must be our understanding of kinship. If the very concept of kinship dissolves as it expands, that may be a necessity – or an occasion for new vocabularies through which to grasp our most basic ties and basic passions. For there seems to be no way to think the bonds of kinship without understanding first what breaks them. That breakability is the bond.

ENDNOTES

1 See also Alison Bechdel, *Are You My Mother?: A Comic Drama* (New York 2012).

2 See Sophocles, *Antigone*, ed. and trans. by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, in: *Sophocles*. Vol. II: *Antigone, The Women of Trachis, Philoctetes, Oedipus at Colonus* (Cambridge, MA 1994 [Loeb Classical Library]); Sophocles, *Antigone*, trans. by David Grene, in *Sophocles I: Oedipus the King, Oedipus at Colonus, Antigone*, ed. by David Grene and Richard Lattimore (Chicago 1991); and my *Antigone's Claim: Kinship Between Life and Death* (New York 2000).

3 In *The Empire of Love: Toward a Theory of Intimacy, Genealogy, and Carnality* (Durham 2006), Elizabeth A. Povinelli argues against this kind of separation.

4 On this distinction and others relevant to the French case, see Camille Robcis, *The Law of Kinship: Anthropology, Psychoanalysis, and the Family in France* (Ithaca 2013) and Bruno Perreau, *The Politics of Adoption*, trans. by Deke Dusinberre (Cambridge, MA 2014).

5 Elizabeth Freeman, "Queer Belongings: Kinship Theory and Queer Theory," in: *A Companion to Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer Studies*, ed. by George E. Haggerty and Molly McGarry (Malden, MA / Oxford 2008), 293–314.

6 See especially Gayle Rubin, "The Traffic in Women: Notes on the 'Political Economy' of Sex," in: *Toward an Anthropology of Women*, ed. by Rayna R. Reiter (New York 1975), 157–210. See also my interview with Rubin, "Sexual Traffic," *Differences* 6.2–3 (1994): 62–99.

7 See, for instance, David Schneider, *American Kinship: A Cultural Account*, 2nd ed. (Chicago 1980) and *A Critique of the Study of Kinship* (Ann Arbor 1984); Sylvia Junko Yanagisako, "The Analysis of Kinship Change," in: *Transforming the Past: Tradition and Kinship Among Japanese Americans* (Stanford 1985); Jane Fishburne Collier and Sylvia Junko Yanagisako, eds., *Gender and Kinship: Essays Toward a Unified Analysis* (Stanford 1987); Kath Weston, *Families We Choose: Lesbians, Gays, Kinship* (New York 1991); Marilyn Strathern, *Reproducing the Future: Essays on Anthropology, Kinship, and the New Reproductive Technologies* (New York 1992); and John Borneman, "Until Death Do Us Part: Marriage/Death in Anthropological Discourse," *American Ethnologist* 23.2 (1996): 215–238.

8 I consider the gap between such description and stipulation in "Is Kinship Always Already Heterosexual?" *Differences* 13.1 (2002): 14–44.

9 Claude Lévi-Strauss, *The Elementary Structures of Kinship*. Rev. ed. Trans. by James Harle Bell, John Richard von Sturmer, and Rodney Needham. Ed. by Rodney Needham (Boston 1969) remains the *locus classicus* in classical anthropology.

10 Sophocles, *Oedipus Tyrannus*, ed. and trans. by Hugh Lloyd-Jones, in: *Sophocles*. Vol. I: *Ajax, Electra, Oedipus Tyrannus* (Cambridge, MA 1994 [Loeb Classical Library]). See also David Grene's translation in *Sophocles I*. For Freud's reading, see, for instance, Sigmund Freud, *The Interpretation of Dreams*, in: *The Standard Edition of the Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, Volume IV (1900): The Interpretation of Dreams* (First Part), ed. by James Strachey (London 1953), 261.

11 Euripides, *Bacchae*, ed. and trans. by David Kovacs, in *Euripides*. Vol. IV: *Bacchae, Iphigenia at Aulis, Rhesus* (Cambridge, MA 2002 [Loeb Classical Library]).

12 Euripides, *Bakkhai*, trans. by Reginald Gibbons, with Introduction and Notes by Charles Segal (New York 2001).

13 Frances Bartkowski, *Kissing Cousins: A New Kinship Bestiary* (New York 2008).

14 Friedrich Nietzsche, *The Birth of Tragedy*, trans. by Walter Kaufmann (New York 1967).

15 Oliver Sacks, "The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat," in: *The Man Who Mistook His Wife for a Hat* (New York 1987), 8–22.

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